

## It's been seven decades of cotton for Dahlem family

By VIRGINIA KING

Three men sat at poolside at a family reunion on July 4 at the Arlin Dahlem home in Hamilton and discussed seven decades of cotton and cotton ginning and the lifetime that had evolved around these two things. Mr. Clarence Dahlem, who has been in cotton ginning since anybody else can remember, was in rare form at the reunion as he recalled his life and his years as a ginner, and his ginner son Darnell and his grandson Tommy who are also in the business deferred to him in their similar interests.

The grandson of a German immigrant Mr. Dahlem was born "down the road" from where he has lived all his life. (The grandfather had come from Germany seeking his own father who had immigrated earlier; the youngster had met a Mr. Waverly in Chicago and come south with him as an indentured worker and worked seven years in Waverly Plantation before paying his way out and moving to the Darracott area. Mr. Clarence's father married a girl on the east side of the river and so Mr. Clarence's entire life has been lived in a small area east of Hamilton.)

He began working at an early gin when he was fourteen, "right over there," he says nodding to an area beyond some trees west of the Arlin Dahlem pool. He had picked cotton a year or so at home and decided there was surely a better way to make a living. He went to work at a gin on Will Garner's farm on the Seely Road. The gin was small and was operated by a steam engine powered with sawdust and slabs from Mr. Garner's sawmill which was operated with the same steam engine as were a grist mill and a molasses mill also owned by Mr. Garner. The gin had three stands in it, and three 70-saw gins could gin and bale up to thirty bales a day. The fourteen-year-old Clarence Dahlem learned how to operate the gin — and the grist mill and the sawmill and the molasses mill. Payment for the grindind was in-kind. Mr. Dahlem said they would quit ginning at noon and do corn and cane grinding on Saturdays. Once Mr. Garner asked where his toll was for the day and Mr. Dahlem said it was in a shed but it wasn't. So Mr. Garner put a watch out that night and caught his own two sons taking the toll molasses away in a buggy. "They were selling it to a man who lived right here where this house is; he was making whiskey with it."

Mr. Dahlem didn't care for the Sat-

the car up," recalls Mr. Dahlem; "I got the car up but she did the wrong thing. She started going backward to run over me. I yelled and she stopped just in time."

Mr. Dahlem remembers when cars first came to the area. He said he and his daddy were going to town in the wagon when they saw a T-model — the first car Mr. Dahlem had ever seen. He told the boy to lie flat down in the wagon because "these mules aren't going to understand what this thing is." The mules didn't understand and took off across an adjacent plowed field. "That was the scariest I had ever been." He recalls another mule meeting its first car driven by a doctor at Hamilton. This mule didn't bolt, it dropped dead in its tracks.

The Dahlem's marriage was — and is — a happy marriage; Mr. Dahlem said they have never had a fight. "We always reasoned things out. Sometime you could hear our reasoning a good ways away." She says there was one near fight. "I never have been an early morning person. I do all right, but just leave me alone till it gets on up in the day. One morning at 6:00, I was making biscuits — I roll each out in my hand and put it in a pan — and he came through and patted me on the back end. He was a real big human and I told him not to do that. He did it again and I put that raw biscuit right across his nose. He told me he was going to wear it down to the sawmill and show the men what I had done. I didn't care. Don't bother with me in the morning."

Six children were born to the marriage. The oldest one, Edward, survived a devastating burn from a wood stove fire explosion but died in 1971 of a stroke; Garland, who ginned a while but went into other work, died in 1968; and the youngest, Robert, died at three months. Arlin works in a chemical plant at Columbus; Jerlene is married, lives at Hamilton and works for a doctor in Columbus; and Darnell is a gin operator in Alabama.

For his work at Mr. Garner's gin, Mr. Dahlem made \$1 a day. When he finally got a raise, he made 15 cents a hour as the ginner. Other workers made 10 cents an hour. Mr. Garner finally decided he could not afford to pay so much and decreased the pay to 12 1/2 cents an hour with the other workers to be paid 8 cents. Mr. Dahlem quit. There wasn't another ginner so Mr. Garner came to his house and told him to come back to work at his 15 cents an hour. There were no eight-hour days back then. Mostly they



**COTTON GINNING** - Clarence Dahlem, Travis (Nib) Simmons, and Maxell Honeycutt plus two unidentified workers gin cotton at the Hamilton Electric Gin which was rebuilt after it was demolished in a fire in 1948.

Hamilton gin caught fire in the middle of the 1948 crop year and the gin was rebuilt as the Hamilton Electric Gin. "They all catch fire," says Mr. Dahlem, "and I never saw a good fire." All gins were in wooden structures covered with corrugated tin. The heart-pine structure was filled with dry cotton and the gin burned quickly.

Even today fire is the biggest fear of gin owners. Flammable things come in the gin in dry cotton and one spark can burn an entire gin. Mr. Dahlem recalls bricks, watermelons, snakes, dead cats, big clods of earth, and even a hen found in the cotton. The heavier items were put in cotton sacks by pickers picking by the pound. The hen had likely stone a nest in a cotton house or wagon. Once a live rat went through the feeder from which it fled in a hurry.

Jerlene recalls being at the gin area when it burned. "Jimmy Camp's

ginners in the early days. Dan Taylor at Lackey was the biggest one in that area when the Lackey gin opened. "We had to gin his cotton when it came in because he sold his cotton every Saturday morning." Other of the bigger farmers he recalled were Noel Murif, Marshall Mattox, the Hansons, John Bowen. Mostly though, he said, in his early days cotton grew in little patches. Fifteen bales was a big crop.

Ginning season ran from early September to Christmas. "I remember," Mr. Dahlem recalls, "we ginned some for Mattox on Aug. 12. He recalls also one year when Ed Meeks' cotton land got impassable in the fall and he had to pick it out in the spring. "We ginned it in March. They were picking, cutting stalks, and planting all in the same field."

Before dryers were put in gins, wet cotton was a real problem. It would

been with Servico in Alabama — a year-round operation of gin, cotton storage, warehouse, and storing seed for use by dairy farmers. This is the largest gin in the Southeast, volume-wise with a record year of 37,000 bales and an annual average of 28,000 bales. Servico has a shop producing 12-14-bail module builders — a relatively new operation in cotton growing which changes ginning practices.

Darnell had helped build Farmers Gin in 1964; today the gin is almost totally different, all new equipment having been added gradually.

Tommy is of course the ginner but he no longer runs stands. "We have good help to do this; another man runs the computers (that tell the equipment what to do) and one man works year-round overhauling the gins and working one of the three shifts during ginning season. Though Tommy is paid year round, he is free to do other work

when the gin does not need him.

Because ginning has become a specialized field in which the ginner must understand everything from the problems of growing to the problems of shipping and because gins are now sophisticated, intricate equipment operated by computers, the ginner is a very important person and few expert gingers are available. All three — Mr. Clarence, Darnell, and Tommy — are fascinated with the work. In the years of the Depression, the man could oversee cotton ginning could feed his family which many others could not do. Today a trained and knowledgeable ginner can pick his job and make more than just a decent living.

The three — grandfather, son, grandson — have seen many changes in the cotton world — and have learned to enjoy the challenge offered by the cotton world.

# Pascagoula Public Library Local History & Genealogy Department Dahlem Family History

ters. (In those days a woman's life expectancy was short and her daddy had married four wives.) A vivacious, charming woman today, she was a beauty and Mr. Clarence wanted to get married. She was eighteen and he was nineteen when they married in April of 1927.

The young couple moved into a one-room-with-sideroom log cabin across the hill from their present home. He had saved up \$400 before they married with which they bought "two iron bedsteads, a dresser, a square table, a No. 7 stove (very small — it burned food in a hurry), and a model T roadster."

They built the home they live in (behind Center Hill Church), in 1938 — the year Jerlene was born. (Mrs. Dahlem tends to recall dates by the births, burning, deaths of the couple's children.) All of the children were born at home. There was a ditch between the Dahlem home and the road. Logs went across the ditch and logs (not nailed down) were laid across the two logs to make a bridge (a custom in those days which made for a hairy crossing as anyone who ever went across one of them knows.) One day in coming home, a plank plopped up and the T-model went into the ditch. "I showed her how to drive and I got down in the ditch to lift the car up and told her to drive on off the bridge when I had got

ton, KUSKUSKO ON MILL HAD ONE, and later one was built by the Cockerham family behind the present Easter Grocery. At its height, there were 13 gins in the county. Today there are three.

When TVA came through the country, the Garner mills and gin did not go electric. The gin was torn down and moved to Lackey (in the curve of the road where a school was later built.) Mr. Dahlem went to the new gin at Lackey in 1937 and worked there for ten years. "We made lots of money there," says Mrs. Dahlem, who does not know how much because Mr. Dahlem always handled the money. It appears that he made \$100 a month during ginning season. Al Foster was the gin manager (who was paid by the owner by the bale.) A wooden roller broke and could not be replaced. Mr. Dahlem went to the woods, cut a tree, made a roller of the log, and his makeshift roller operated as long as the gin did. A young Calvin Self assisted Mr. Dahlem here.

In 1947, Mr. Dahlem moved as gin-ner to Hamilton where Noel Murff had a gin. This three-stand gin was operated by a huge diesel motor. Mr. Murff had died and his widow had married C.J. Bender. The motor broke down, and Mr. Bender went to Birmingham to look for a new one. While he was gone, Mrs. Bender sold the gin to Puckett Cotton Oil Co. of Amory who also bought the Lackey gin. The

grapes. We were down there at the store waiting — Arlin loved the balogna and I loved the grapes — for Daddy to buy, and it caught fire and in no time at all it was gone."

Everything in the gin was destroyed but, nobody knows why — one gin stand stood intact. It was later installed in a gin owned by Macon Garner (son of the original gin where Mr. Dahlem had worked) at Caledonia. The son's son was killed in that gin and the father left the ginning business forever.

After the fire, Puckett rebuilt the gin — "Hamilton Electric Gin." It had four 80-saw gin stands — and could gin 120-130 bales from morning to midnight. John Adair and Al Foster were the gin managers. Puckett processed the seed in its feed mill and Mr. Dahlem was the ginner. In 1963 Mr. Dahlem fell from the top of a tower dryer and received back injuries which still cause him problems.

Darnell was in high school and came to help his father at the gin as did Garland, and Darnell got his start in the ginning business. In 1964 he went to work for the Moss Gordon Gin Co., which had developed a lint cleaner for gins. These lint cleaners became a necessity after cotton picking began being done by machinery which pulls everything off the bush except the main stalk.

For many years all cotton was brought to the gin by wagon — one bale, occasionally two, pulled by two mules. Mr. Dahlem recalls that at that time there was no bridge across Nickles creek and crossing it with a wagon loaded with cotton was a tricky business. Mr. Dahlem recalls seeing "Old Man Henry Boyd with two little mules and two bales of cotton." People told him those little mules couldn't get all that cotton across that creek bed. He told them to get out of his way. "He got up on the front, took the reins and squealing like some big old hog, he hollered at those little mules and they went right on across."

In earlier days, ginning went on six days a week from dew-off to dark (and later after electricity could light the inside of the gin) and Mr. Dahlem's days were long. They did not gin on Sunday. They did not pick cotton on Sunday. He recalls Mrs. Luna Garner coming to the early gin a little after midnight on Saturday. "Her husband ran off and hid and she made us close down as soon as we finished that bale. We couldn't work on Sunday."

Wagons were supposed to carry either one or two medium-sized bales. "But we ginned whatever they wanted, whatever they had in the wagon — from 300 pounds to 700 pounds." (Today's gins cannot turn out 700-pound bales because large bales cannot be pressed into a size that can be shipped. About 500 pounds is average now.)

There were not many "big" cotton

would come by once a year and slowly, carefully sharpen the saws.) The dryers began to be installed around 1948. Mr. Dahlem says he got "sent to school in Tupelo" to learn about the dryers but the demonstrator was a young man with no experience in cotton and ginner had to learn about the things on their own.

In the '40s, many gins were being built. Mr. Dahlem recalls gins being built in Greenwood Springs, Lackey, on Highway 12, and Caledonia. Darnell says the equipment was very simple and fairly easily installed. After newer, more modern gins were made and transport of cotton from field to gin was made easier, many of these gins were demolished; the equipment went to South America and other foreign countries in the beginning stages of cotton growing.

After 26 years at Electric Gin, Mr. Dahlem moved to Farmers' Gin after L.C. Sanders left the ginner spot there. He stayed there until 1985 and "I would still be there if my back hadn't been such a bad shape after that fall from the dryer."

Today he doesn't oversee a gin but he worries doubly hard for the farmers about the drought and dying fields. And he worries about the quality of ginner. "I know how to work, really work. I don't know if these young men know how to work. They couldn't have handled what I used to do."

Tommy's young wife might disagree with him. During ginning season at Hamilton, she sees very little of him and doesn't come home to eat or to sleep. But he can and does "handle" it and clearly enjoys the work and its challenge.

Grandson Tommy began work in 1981 while he was still in school. His father Darnell came back to Hamilton to assist Mr. Clarence in training Tommy.

Darnell had become a gin erector for Moss Gordon. In 1965, he put up a gin in Dublin in the Mississippi Delta; and when it was finished, he was asked to run it. He stayed there four years. Then he went to Indianola where he erected a gin in the urban section and operated it for two years, after which he erected a larger, more modern gin complex in the city's industrial park. This included a modern gin, a cotton warehouse, a seed processing plant, a seed storage area. Seed were delinted and bagged for sale. He stayed there for two years.

In 1972 Darnell and his family moved to Lake Providence, La., to build a delinting plant, a soybean operator (cleaning and bagging for sale), a gin, and cotton storage facility. Later he returned to Hamilton where he bought Winders Parts (now operated by another son), helped out at Farmers' Gin and trained Tommy. In Mr. Clarence's last year, the gin had its record year of 12,000 bales.

For the past five seasons he has



**THE MAJOR DAHLEMS** — Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Dahlem have three of their original six children left; and though they didn't all stay in farming, they are home often to visit — Darnell, Jerlene Dahlem English, and Arlin.



**Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Dahlem**



**THREE GENERATIONS OF GINNERS** — Mr. Clarence Dahlem, his son Darnell, and grandson Tommy Dahlem share some vast changes in the world of cotton and cotton ginning.